News



Holocaust survivors place candles at the former crematorium as they attend a ceremony in the former Nazi German concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz during ceremonies marking the 78th anniversary of the liberation of the camp in Brzezinka, Poland, Friday, Jan. 27, 2023. (AP Photo/Michal Dyjuk)

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OSWIECIM, Poland — January 27, 2023

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Auschwitz-Birkenau survivors and other mourners commemorated the 78th anniversary Jan. 27 of the liberation of the Nazi German death camp, some expressing horror that war has again shattered peace in Europe and the lesson of Never Again is being forgotten.

The former concentration and extermination camp is located in the town of Oświęcim in southern Poland, which was under the occupation of German forces during World War II and became a place of systematic murder of Jews, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, Roma and others targeted for elimination by Adolf Hitler and his henchmen.

In all, some 1.1 million people were killed at the vast complex before it was liberated by Soviet troops on Jan. 27, 1945.

Today the site, with its barracks and barbed wire and the ruins of gas chambers, stands as one of the world's most recognized symbols of evil and a site of pilgrimage for millions from around the world.

Jewish and Christian prayers for the dead were recited at the memorial site, which lies only 300 kilometers (185 miles) from Ukraine, where Russian aggression is creating unthinkable death and destruction — a conflict on the minds of many this year.

"Standing here today at this place of remembrance, Birkenau, I follow with horror the news from the east that the Russian army, which liberated us here, is waging a war there in Ukraine. Why? Why?" lamented survivor Zdzisława Włodarczyk during observances Jan. 27.

Piotr Cywinski, Auschwitz state museum director, compared Nazi crimes to those the Russians have committed in Ukrainian towns like Bucha and Mariupol. He said they were inspired by a "similar sick megalomania" and that free people must not remain indifferent.

"Being silent means giving voice to the perpetrators," Cywinski said. "Remaining indifferent is tantamount to condoning murder."

Russian President Vladimir Putin attended observances marking the 60th anniversary of the camp’s liberation in 2005. This year, no Russian official at all was invited due to Russia’s attack on Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy marked the event in a social media post, alluding to his own country's situation.

"We know and remember that indifference kills along with hatred," he said.

"Indifference and hatred are always capable of creating evil together only. That is why it is so important that everyone who values life should show determination when it comes to saving those whom hatred seeks to destroy."

An Israeli teacher, Yossi Michal, paying tribute to the victims with a teachers union delegation, said it was important to remember the past, and while he said what is happening in Ukraine is terrible, he felt each case is unique and they shouldn't be compared.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy party has its roots in the post-Word War II neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, called the Holocaust "the abyss of humanity. An evil that touched also our country with the infamy of the racial laws of 1938."

Bogdan Bartnikowski, a Pole who was 12 years old when he was transported to Auschwitz, said the first images he saw on television last February of refugees fleeing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine triggered traumatic memories.

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He was stunned seeing a little girl in a large crowd of refugees holding her mother with one hand and grasping a teddy bear in the other.

"It was literally a blow to the head for me because I suddenly saw, after almost 80 years, what I had seen in a freight car when I was being transported to Auschwitz. A little girl was sitting next to me, hugging a doll to her chest," Bartnikowski, now 91, said.

Bartnikowski was among several survivors of Auschwitz who spoke about their experiences to journalists Jan. 26.

Another, Stefania Wernik, who was born at Auschwitz in November 1944, less than three months before its liberation, spoke of Auschwitz being a "hell on earth."

She said when she was born she was so tiny that the Nazis tattooed her number — 89136 — on her thigh. She was washed in cold water, wrapped in rags and subjected to medical experiments.

And yet her mother had abundant milk, and they both survived. After the war, her mother returned home and reunited with her husband, and "the whole village came to look at us and said it's a miracle."

She appealed for "no more fascism, which brings death, genocide, crimes, slaughter and loss of human dignity."

Among those who attended Jan. 27's commemorations was Doug Emhoff, the husband of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris. Emhoff, the first Jewish person to be married to one of the top two nationally elected U.S. officials, bowed his head at an execution wall at Auschwitz, where he left a wreath of flowers in the U.S. flag's colors and the words: "From the people of the United States of America."

The Germans established Auschwitz in 1940 for Polish prisoners; later they expanded the complex, building death chambers and crematoria where Jews from across Europe were brought by train to be murdered.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said "the suffering of 6 million innocently murdered Jews remains unforgotten — as does the suffering of the survivors."

"We recall our historic responsibility on Holocaust Memorial Day so that our Never Again endures in future," he wrote on Twitter.

The German parliament was holding a memorial event focused this year on those who were persecuted for their sexual orientation. Thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people were incarcerated and killed by the Nazis. Their fate was only publicly recognized decades after the end of World War II.

Elsewhere in the world on Jan. 27 events were planned to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, an annual commemoration established by a United Nations resolution in 2005.

In Britain, candles were lit to remember victims of genocide in homes and public buildings, including Buckingham Palace.